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PART V

Representation in Contemporary Literature, Film, TV, and New Media

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AN EMPATHETIC ART: RENWEN 仁文MASCULINITY IN ASIAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Several worlds shape my take on masculinity. As an American citizen of Chinese descent, I grew up in Hong Kong (when it was a British colony) with Chinese classics and Cantonese opera. After receiving my doctoral training in Elizabethan drama and Renaissance poetry from Berkeley, I have carved out an enclave in the UCLA English Department since the 1980s by championing emerging literature by Asian Americans and women of color. In this essay, I seek to explore new paths of empathy beyond the borders of languages, nations, genders, and genres in proposing a new benchmark for masculinity through the fiction of David Wong Louie, Russell Charles Leong, and Viet Thanh Nguyen. I contend that empathy, fortified by the ethic of care, is most effectively instilled through literature, thereby speaking to the vital role of humanism in our divisive world today.[1]

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The function of literature has been a topic of endless debate since Aristotle. In my opinion, it is art for the sake of reflecting and instilling empathy. Empathy—cognitive, affective, somatic, and spiritual—defined in the medical field as "the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within their frame of reference, that is, the capacity to place oneself in another's position," is to me an essential attribute of any good writer ("Empathy"). The Asian American literary legacy delineated in this chapter blends the Confucian ideals of *ren* 仁 (benevolence, mutual care) and *wen* 文 (literacy, artistry) with the feminist ethic of care.

Wen is a difficult word to translate, as it can refer specifically to literature and broadly to the fine arts, the humanities, even letters and science. Both its specific and general meanings are invoked in my argument. Traditionally, *wenwu* 文武 (literary arts and martial arts) has been a dyadic masculine ideal, with *wen* taking precedence over *wu* (K. Louie); Confucius is venerated as *wensheng* 文圣 (sage of culture) whereas Guan Yu is worshipped as 武圣 *wusheng* (sage of war). According to Confucius, the goal of learning is to be a *junzi* 君子, a "superior" person who implicitly embodies the cardinal virtue of *ren* 仁, a term Joseph Levenson and Franz Schurmann nicely parse as both "human-kindness" and "humankind-ness" (Levenson & Schurmann, 1969, p. 42). Therefore, a *wenren* 文人 (a person of letters) ought to be also empathetic and caring. Felicitously, the Chinese words for "human" (人) and "benevolence" (仁) are homonyms (pronounced alike as *ren*), nicely amplifying the Confucian saying *renzherenye* 仁者人也: to be human is to care for another. No less fortuitously, the expressions for "human kindness" and "literary studies" are also near homonyms in English and Cantonese: "humanity" (human race, compassion) and the humanities (branches of knowledge concerning human culture); in Cantonese, the terms for "people" 人民 and "the humanities" 人文 have identical pronunciation. Playing on these translingual puns, I turn the Chinese idiom for the humanities *renwen*人文 (literally, human writing) into the eponymous *renwen* 仁文 (literally, humane

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literature)—a coinage that seeks to complement the *wenwu* ideal of yore, to proclaim a unique Asian American legacy, and to inscribe a new benchmark for masculinity, humanity and the humanities.

Although an "ethic of care" has feminist beginnings in the West, the Confucian concept of *ren* 仁, as noted by James D. Sellman and Sharon Rose, coincides with this ethic (2–3). Because of insidious stereotypes of Asian men in American popular culture, however, caring Asian American men of letters are often underappreciated in North America. In David Wong Louie's "One Man's Hysteria—Real and Imagined—in the Twentieth Century" ("OMH" hereafter), the speaker's masterful elocution of the metaphysical poetic canon falls on the deaf ears of his white companion. In Russell C. Leong's "Phoenix Eyes" ("PE" thereafter), the narrator, who has internalized biases about his own kind, avoided consorting with fellow Asians till he undergoes a sea change in Taipei, where he is irresistibly drawn to Chinese men of talents. In Viet Thanh Nguyen's "I'd Love You to Want Me" ("ILY" thereafter), the professor's intellectual sophistication and imagination fail to take hold in the dominant culture, though it has held his wife's unebbing affection.

Thus the *wen* 文 masculine ideal takes on very different valences in the New World. On the one hand, because it so deviates from the American linkage of masculinity with domination in the form of physical prowess or economic and political clout, littérateurs of Asian descent were hardly noticed till the Civil Rights and Asian American movements in the 1970s, let alone lionized in the mainstream media (Chin et al 3–39). On the other hand, precisely because Asian immigrants and refugees had faced unspeakable historical traumas that threatened their very existence, *renwen* 仁文 —literature that arouses empathy—gains extraordinary traction in putting Asian Americans on the map. This collective record of our existence—from the poems carved by anonymous Chinese forefathers on the walls of Angel Island (the immigration port where Chinese immigrants were detained for an indefinite time between 1910 and 1940 before being deported or admitted) to Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*—differs considerably from the canon produced by self-assured Chinese literati, epitomized by famous poets such as Li Bai, Sushi, or Xu Zhimo.

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Unlike these Chinese luminaries, Asian American authors do not write from the position of racial supremacy. Their precarious position as Asian American *wenren* 文人(men of letters) paradoxically redounds to their *renwen* 仁文—their ability to feel and to elicit, through fiction, empathy for those who are members of disadvantaged minorities. The characters in these three tales are buffeted by international and interracial turbulences. Louie's speaker's anxiety about paternity and extinction, for example, must be traced to the history of what Fae Myenne Ng dubs "Orphan Bachelors." Because of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and American anti-miscegenation laws, Chinese were barred from the U.S. for decades; those who were in the country dared not leave lest they be denied re-entry. Thus most Chinese laborers who had worked in the gold mines or built the Transcontinental Railroad could neither marry nor sire progeny. The Chinese who braved the Exclusion laws by entering the country illegally as "paper sons" (using assumed identities as sons of American citizens to evade the ban on immigration from China) risked instant deportation; those who managed to set foot in the Gold Mountain at the time were threatened anew with deportation during the "Confession Program" spearheaded by Senator McCarthy between 1956 and 1965. Furthermore, because the U.S. waged successive wars in Asian countries—Japan during WWII, Korea and China during the Korean War, and Vietnam from 1955 to 1973, Americans of Asian ancestry, even including those in the U.S. Army, were often maltreated for being indistinguishable from the enemies. Louie's protagonist cannot help but wax "hysterical" at the thought of another impending war.

Transnational and interracial dynamics exacerbate the dual domination of Chinese and American patriarchy faced by Leong's narrator in "PE." Charles L. Leong (R. Leong's father), a journalist, recalls that in 1920-30s even "The Houses" of prostitution on Watsonville's Union Street, which catered to a predominately farming community, with literally hundreds of "men who lived without wives and families," maintained the color line. "The French House" inhabited by a hostess who spoke with a French accent was "the most expensive " and restricted," meaning …White men

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only" (C. Leong 65, 68). Fat chance of sexual intimacy for the "orphan bachelors," except with nonwhites or fellow men. The persistent preference for male heirs to carry on the family name, however, breeds sexism and homophobia on both sides of the Pacific. The protagonist, a gay son who refuses to marry for procreation, violates the principal Chinese tenet of filial piety. In light of how a "bloodless genocide" has been enacted through "Exclusion and Confession, the two slamming doors of America" (the subtitle of Ng's memoir), this son is doubly "guilty" of abetting racial extinction and betraying the family.

Finally, the Vietnam-American War (called Vietnam War in America and American War in Vietnam) constitutes a haunting backdrop to Nguyen's "ILY," a story that fleshes out the author's observation that "all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory" (Nguyen, *Nothing* 4). "For people like my parents and the Syrians today, their voyages across land and sea are far more perilous than the ones undertaken by astronauts or Christopher Columbus," Nguyen observes. "They are nothing less than heroic" (Nguyen, "The Hidden"). The refugees in the U.S. also "faced hostility, such as racist attacks on Vietnamese fishermen by the Ku Klux Klan in Texas" (Nguyen & Wong). Only by uncovering the hidden scars left by this war and its aftermath can we fathom the holes in the aging couple's discrepant memories.

The characters in the three stories, on account of their stateside position, enact the *wen* ideal of their ancestral cultures with a telling Asian American difference. They are looked at askance by the dominant culture (and even by themselves) on account of various "handicaps" real and imagined, imposed or internalized. A sense of vulnerability besets each protagonist owing to race, sexual orientation, refugee status, mental disability, or any intersection thereof. Far from detracting from their *wen* appeal, however, their liability paradoxically augments their empathy. Louie's speaker, who hankers in vain after matrimony and fatherhood, masters *belle lettres* with the intention to safeguard humanity, in the event of a nuclear holocaust, by dint of the humanities. Leong's protagonist, a pariah in his own family and an outsider in a white society, develops an *esprit de corps* with other disfranchised members in Taipei with whom he forges an affiliative bond. Nguyen's couple, who have suffered enormous hardship to live again as unwanted refugees under the star-spangled banner, cares for each other indefatigably in a sui generis *wen* 文 fashion in defiance of dotage. Having weathered the storm across the ocean literally, they are living proofs of the adage that "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Unlike putative masculinity shored up by money, status, physical prowess, or political sway, these three tales underscore the "soft" power of *renwen* 仁文—empathy embedded in and emanating from literature and the humanities—a potency that is undiminished by age, ailment, and even death. Being highly empathetic themselves, the three authors also deploy what Suzanne Keen calls "narrative empathy" strategically as a "rhetorical" tool with a target readership in mind (71, 82).

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My intention in foregrounding caring men of letters in Asian American fiction is fivefold. First, I seek to bridge the current divide between careerist academic training (whereby college degrees alone are no guarantee of character) and moral education by reinstating the Confucian objective of learning—self-cultivation. Second, the coincidence of the Western *feminine* "ethic of care" and the Confucian *masculine* ideal goes to show that *renwen* 仁文 pursuit behooves human beings of all genders. Third, the artistic, caring, and romantic characters analyzed belie Hollywood stereotypes of Asian men as aggressive *kung-fu* fighters, devious masterminds, or asexual computer nerds. Fourth, *renwen* 仁文 masculinity undermines the diehard American association of manhood with machismo, lest Asian American writers counter stereotypes by "remasculating" (Viet Nguyen's coinage) themselves in the oppressors' images. Last but not least, through replacing swords with pens, blood with ink, and rivalry with empathy, this Asian American *renwen* 仁文 heritage bodes well for humanity, possibly forestalling its self-destruction. This ethnic literary tradition not only limns alternative masculinity and stakes a permanent claim for Asian Americans in the new world but also offers a blueprint for the survival of humanity through the humanities.

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"One Man's Hysteria—Real and Imagined—in the Twentieth Century"

"When the first bombs fell, I'll be ready. Not with fishing nets or Geiger counters or fallout shelter but with poetry—memorized, metabolized, and ready to recite," David Wong Louie's speaker, Stephen, says as he opens "OMH" (147). The catchy opener immediately draws the reader to the speaker, a poetry aficionado more concerned about safeguarding human civilization than saving his own skin. This eponymous "man" (self-identified as Stephen), a writer with a strong sense of mission about preserving cultural heritage, displays a high degree of wit, erudition, and individuality—a bona fide *wenren* 文人 who would no doubt cut a shining figure in Chinese literary circles. As a Chinese American, however, he is anything but cavalier. At first glance, he waxes "hysterical" out of fear of an impending nuclear war. Other reasons that affect his nerves soon surface between the lines. Like so many other male protagonists in Louie's *Pangs of Love and Other Writings*, Stephen suffers from the "pangs of despised love" and white women's and men's "contumely" (*Hamlet* 3.1.73–74). Racism without and within provokes the speaker's sexual anxiety, wished-for paternity, and a subconscious desire to "pass" as white. Like the colonial subject described by Homi Bhabha as a "*subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite,*" Stephen has introjected a "not quite, not white" subaltern status, making his passing a Sisyphean venture (Bhabha 85). Notwithstanding his felicity with English and full acceptance of the dominant culture's standards of beauty, literacy, and masculinity, he fails to gain any *wen* 文 leverage stateside.

Stephen's sense of security is further vitiated by the prospect of extinction, called forth by the long memory of early Chinese ancestors persecuted by nativists and denied fatherhood on account of exclusion and anti-miscegenation laws. Louie dispatches red herrings about a phantom offspring throughout the tale. Stephen wishes to practice his poetry drill with Laura (his bedfellow), but he tries in vain to wake her "until the baby cried," teasing the reader into thinking that the two have a child, only to be disabused in the next paragraph: "Of course, she is not our child" (148). He attributes his childless "decision" to the sorry state of the world, but he cannot help expressing deep paternal longing: "I want a child to bear my name into the future, its bleakness notwithstanding" (160). Stephen's own narrator in his creative writing is a father, though inept in his querulous wife Nancy's eyes, to a son named Todd. Toward the end of the tale within a tale, Todd has mistaken the red background of Gauguin's "Jacob Wrestling with the Angel" for blood. After the father character explains that "red isn't always blood…just as black isn't always hair," he muses: "I wonder now what color Todd's blood is. Does it even have color? Is there blood between us, me and this creation of mine?" (168) This "creation" refers at once to Stephen's first-person narrator's son and meta-fictionally to Stephen's imagination. The only "bloodline" Stephen could envision is an imaginary one. When Todd notices that his father's "hair is black too," the narrator resumes his reverie: "And as red is blood…then black must be death. Isn't it?" (168) The motifs of genocide, extinction, and masculinity in ruins bleed into one another. The black hair insinuates that even the fictional father cannot beget a "true-blooded" American. This fixation on blood and posterity resonates not only with white supremacy and the historical legacy of enforced bachelorhood but also with Chinese and American patrilineal ideals, which Stephen can fulfill only virtually in his overwrought brain.

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Even though his is no ordinary brain, Stephen's *wen* endowments hardly lend him an advantage on the social and romantic fronts, where his mastery of the Western canon falls short of making him a man in the eyes of the dominant culture. For all his Anglophone literacy, he feels inferior to Laura, his white wife, the "standard-bearer" (to borrow Chang-rae Lee's appositive for the Caucasian wife in *Native Speaker*) who calls the shots. She stands over Stephen's writing, spews criticism, and demands constant revisions, to the extent of removing the character for whom she is the prototype. In bed she rebuffs his amorous overtures; against his own memory of her "multi-orgasmic night" when they first made love, Laura gibes that she has never been "privileged to such delirium," adding, "my memory is good. I remember our first time. Your pal down there between your legs took the night off" (157).

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Her favorite poem, Stephen tells, is "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," prompting an association between Eliot's feckless persona and Stephen, who echoes Prufrock in asking, "But do I dare make love?" (159)

Lacking conventional hallmarks of masculinity—sexual confidence, matrimony, fatherhood, distinguished military service—this *wen* devotee is unmoored in the Anglo-Saxon ocean of words. Although his successful assimilation is evident from his mastery of Western poetry, his suburban neighborhood, and his white partner, his assimilation, as Anne Cheng says regarding Asian Americans generally, "tenders a promise of ethnic intermixing that draws itself short of the color line" (Cheng 69). Racial consciousness repeatedly unleashes the henpecked narrator's hysteria, even when Laura reassures him that nothing catastrophic is going to happen too close to their white neighborhood: "Radioactivity might be color-blind, but those who control the bombs aren't…They never dropped any atomic bombs on Germany…and then went ahead and unloaded on Japan." As she mentions Japan "she claps her hands together, twice, directly over my head. 'Boom!'" (Louie 155). By sounding the alarm literally above Stephen's head, Laura, intentionally or not, reminds her Asian partner that his physiognomy is forever a target of racist violence.

Viet Thanh Nguyen has differentiated between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" forms of violence, "embodied respectively in the regenerative violence that white mythology claims for itself and the degenerative violence that this mythology displaces onto blackness" ("Remasculation" 131). He notes that the so-called "regenerative" practice may come across to other nations as just another "lawless, degenerative struggle for control," but is "domestically displaced onto blackness and the ghetto, where it serves as the other of a state-sponsored, legitimate violence" ("Remasculation" 132). Louie's story gives Nguyen's exposition yet another twist. From the international context, Stephen, as a person of Asian ancestry, is on the receiving end of the ostensible "regenerative heroic practice" that legitimizes American offshore wars; from the national context, being the stereotypical model minority, he falls outside the view of both legitimate and illegitimate forms of violence that inhere in an American definition of manhood. Rather than being commended for heroicmettle, "Chinamen" are served up as cannon fodder. Stephen confides that ever since watching an Air Force film of a nuclear warhead being loaded into a missile silo, "military hardware and human sexual apparatus have merged" in him so that "mushroom clouds" burgeon in his skull whenever the foreplay begins (159). Stephen's hysteria is all too understandable in light of his complexion.

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After such knowledge, what redemption? I contend that the *wen* 文 avatar who conjures up a virtual son also broaches the possibility of an indelible lineage sustained not by blood but by ink. The speaker has labored to preserve human civilization through digesting poetry by white writers and pleaded with his white companion to compensate for his thwarted paternity by working his name into "a poem in which [his] name appears at least once…not necessarily spelled out but hidden perhaps in the manner Shakespeare is buried…in the Forty-sixth Psalm" (160). Has the author not preserved his own kind and encrypted his name in this metafiction? True to the belletristic profession of the author (Louie or Stephen), this narrative has an intricate contrapuntal structure, alternating between the presumably "real" interaction between Stephen and Laura and the "imagined" family in his fiction and, one must add, between both of these versions and Louie, the real author. Because Stephen puts so much of his own life into his fiction despite his emphatic assertion that he is "not an autobiographical writer," both versions (in which manhood is bedeviled) also self-consciously reflect the author's "real" anxiety (161).

Louie seems to rear his *wen* 文head in the tale's open ending, in which Stephen jots down a few prompts for his fiction, setting in motion the three-way traffic between author and character, and between character-as-author and his narrator:

You are Stephen
Nancy is Laura

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You are Laura too…
Work in Luddites?
Don't forget Todd, he changes the world. (171)

These reminders churn up several fictitious layers. Is Laura any more "real" than Nancy, or is she too a figment of Stephen's imagination? Is the "real" Stephen a bachelor like his immigrant ancestors of yore, without any wife/bedfellow/girlfriend or son? Is Stephen "emasculating" himself in declaring that he is "Laura too"?

Stephen may lack a biological heir, but if we take the clincher seriously that Todd, begotten in the house of fiction, changes the world, then "OMH" surely ends on a note of triumph. This trophy son heralds the establishment of the *renwen* 仁文 legacy, historically and metafictionally. It takes an empathetic author to feel what hysterical wretches feel and to commit their woes feelingly in ink. Louie has produced a mesmerizing story with a puckish structure, not unlike John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*; he has even sneaked his initials into the last two lines scribbled, which contain a D, W, and L. Just as the Chinese forefathers denied matrimony and fatherhood had left behind poetry on the walls of the Angel Island that are studied to this day, the author of "OMH," who passed away in 2018, has left behind some of the best American stories and other writings that will surely carry his name into the future.

"Phoenix Eyes"

Russell Charles Leong's "Phoenix Eyes" ("PE") fleshes out Susan Stanford Friedman's concept of identity as a "historically embedded site…a crossroads of multiply situated knowledges" (17, 19). Terence, the gay Chinese American narrator, chafes under both Chinese patriarchy and white racism in the U.S., but he gains a new appreciation for Asian virility in Taipei through two encounters with *wen* 文 figures: an armless artist who epitomizes masculine potency notwithstanding (or by virtue of) his physical handicap and P., a sensitive Asian man who reflects his grandmother's ethic of care. "PE" thus evokes multiple alternatives to hegemonic masculinity. Tackling crisscrossing lines of difference, Leong's articulation of a gay Asian American male subjectivity questions not only Asian and American gender norms but also the "universal" straight subjects of Asian American studies and the white subjects of queer studies.

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The title prompts us to see outside the "normal" vision of the white, Asian, and Asian American heterosexual male subject. Terence, who works as an escort for a call line in Taipei after being rejected by his Stateside parents, is nicknamed *feng yen* 凤眼 [phoenix eyes] because of the way the outer folds of his eyes "curve like the tail of the proverbial phoenix" (135). Such eyes are said to be "seductive in a woman, but a deviation in a man" (135). The divergent assessment of the same shape of eyes underlines the vagaries of gender distinctions, of what constitutes feminine and masculine beauty, proper and improper sexual orientation. In a profession in which generic "Oriental bodies" are bought and sold, "phoenix eyes" also signify Orientalist objectification whereby one is desired or shunned on account of some phenotypic accident. Since the narrative is presented from the perspective of those eponymous eyes, however, the object becomes the subject: Terence's "deviant" eyes scrutinize heteronormative exclusiveness and Orientalist patronage.

Chafing under both Chinese patriarchy and American racism, Terence offers a scathing look at both. The mandate of patrilineage makes him a pariah in his own home: "Ba and Ma had high hopes of me, of a wife and children soon…When I told them I would never marry, they threatened to disown me…It was as if I, the offending branch, had been pruned from the family tree" (130). Since Chinese filial piety is defined in large part by fulfilling the obligation to propagate, Terence's refusal to marry and procreate is tantamount to a betrayal of the family. Outside the Chinese household, Terence faces racism in his natal country, where Asians are cast as hyper-feminine, and where "Asian

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men going together was considered 'incestuous'" (131). In Taipei, by contrast, Terence finds fellow Asians physically, intellectually, and spiritually engaging. Instead of seeing them as nerdy or wimpy, or regarding attraction to Asians as some kind of perversion, he finds himself drawn to Chinese men whose virility is expressed not in the forms of brawny physique or economic power but through art, an ethic of care, or self-reliance from overcoming disability.

Terence's picaresque encounters in the Far East enable him to tell the difference between the physical and economic trappings of masculinity and the soft power of *renwen* 仁文. He frowns on white Sinophiles who equate youthful Asian bodies with "Sung poetry" or with "important antiques" (133, 135), and on a Chinese art connoisseur in Hong Kong whose "sensual tastes ran to young, unschooled hairdressers and bartenders with thick hair and bright eyes" (137). Terence himself secures for unfaithful businessmen's wives the services of younger men: "Struggling (but handsome) students, and out-of-season soccer players were my specialty. Women, we found, went for the strong thighs and tanned calves of the players, which performed more diligently than the listless limbs of their pale husbands" (137). All the dashing escorts at the call line "gave up [their] youth to those who desired youth" (135). The ways the strapping bodies service the senior matrons are palpably emasculating.

Ironically, it is during an encounter with an armless artist who paints with toes and mouth that Terence comes face to face with sterling manhood: "I looked at the crayfish emerging as his toes deftly controlled the bamboo brush" and, after "inserting the brush into his mouth…the green carapace of a grasshopper emerged" (139). When an onlooker tries to bargain with him, the painter answers calmly: "I don't lower my price, but neither do I raise my price for anyone," a response that bespeaks a character of integrity and confidence (140). "How did he bathe or cook or make love?" Terence wonders. "Despite his lack of arms, he seemed to have a part that I lacked" (140). The "part" that Terence (a dilettante in love and art) lacks may be a sense of purpose and commitment. Coming right after the query about lovemaking, however, the lack connotes a sense of impotence, even castration. His image of the armless artist as a potent figure is made apparent later when Terence, without using his arms or hands, induces a businessman's ejaculation: "Flexing my calves and thighs, I pressed my feet together until finally he could not contain himself. At that moment, in my mind, I could see the painter" (141). Up against an artist whose inner resolve triumphs over his physical challenge, Terence feels inadequate. Setting off this artist who uses his defective body to create beauty against young call boys who commercialize their bodies, Leong redefines masculinity as emanating from artistic and spiritual self-possession independent of physical endowments.

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Another relationship that stands out from the ubiquitous commerce of flesh is Terence's friendship with P., his co-worker at the call line. Just as the skin-deep attributes of masculinity pale beside the sure-footed art of the painter, the intimacy between Terence and P. challenges the common representation of gay relationships as sex-driven philandry. The two men's repartee at their first meeting at the National Palace Museum in Taipei knowingly parodies class cleavages and the objectification of human bodies: "You'd have been a good model for a stable boy," P. quips, to which Terence retorts: "And you are a Tang prince waiting to mount the horse?" (132). The double-entendre is reminiscent of the witty dialogue of Chinese *wenren* 文人 who spontaneously compose couplets by each supplying a line. Although the two men later work together as call boys performing sexual service for rich clients, they forge a bond that is at once physical, fraternal, and spiritual: "Sometimes after double-dating with clients…P. and I would fall asleep on the same bed, feeling safer in each other's arms" (134). During a visit to a lotus pond, Terence again puts his consoling arm around P. when the latter is visibly shaken upon seeing the white lotuses, which remind him of his caring grandmother. Ostracized in a large clan for being unable to produce a male heir, this woman had adopted and raised P. as her own son, and "[e]ach year, during the two or three weeks that lotuses were in full bloom, she would, just before dusk, pour clean water onto the bulb of each pale flower" (134). The next day she would collect the liquid on the flower to brew a single cup of tea to share with P. The reference to her lowly status

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serves as another indirect indictment of Chinese patriarchy, which disfranchises son-less mothers, daughters, and gay men alike.

The flashback and the scene at the lotus pond also attest to the formation of alternative kinship, as evinced by the affection between the surrogate grandmother and P. and the mutual care of Terence and P. Their kindred feelings are affiliative rather than filiative. Against the oppressive tenets of patrilineage, the connections forged by P. with the grandmother and with Terence show the possibility of a nondiscriminatory family independent of the bloodline. The call line workers are able to form a virtual family that is more hospitable to its members than the treatment accorded to them by their heteronormative households. The contrast between Terence's filiative and affiliative families is depicted in two parallel scenes. After Terence's return to the U.S, he attends his father's 70th birthday celebration, during which Terence feels uneasy accompanying his parents from table to table giving toasts, dreading questions from the guests regarding his marital status and offspring. He is relieved upon reaching the last table: "We lifted our last shots of brandy, like I had at my own farewell meal [in Taipei]…There, the members of my adopted family…whom my blood family would never meet…used me as an excuse to toast each other…I suddenly felt orphaned with my memories" (142). Terence is far more attached to the call line in Taipei than to his bloodline.

Leong further inveighs against heteronormative abuse when he describes P's fate after contracting AIDS. Terence receives a foreboding postcard from P. and then learns about his death three days later, but "no funeral services were held." "In Asian families, you would just disappear," Terence bitterly remarks. "They simply could not call AIDS by its proper name: Better handle it yourself, keep it within the family. Out of earshot" (143). For a man to contract AIDS in a homophobic culture is perhaps the ultimate "emasculation." The person needing utmost care and psychological and emotional support is shunned as a source of shame and disgrace.

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Against such flagrant familial erasure Terence has committed P. to memory, memorial, and transfiguration. His regard for P. is inseparable from their shared *renwen* 仁文 sensibility, evident in their repartee during their initial encounter at the museum and in P.'s valedictory postcard. Terence is literally shaken by the news of P.'s passing: "Rereading his card, I began to tremble from the fear and beauty of his words, 'A new birthday in a new month.' Being nominally Buddhist, he believed in rebirth" (144). Terence is stricken not by P.'s physique but by his words. Terence's tremor also recalls P.'s at the sight of the lotus blossoms that reminded him of his grandmother's loving gestures. P's beautiful words in turn evoke memories of the now-deceased comrade, their moments of tenderness by the lotus pond, and the possibility of rebirth. The two remembrances not only illustrate that those who have passed away continue to live in the memories of those who love them but also imply, through the Buddhist allusions, that the beloved will live again. As a symbol of rebirth in Western mythology, the phoenix in the title resonates with this theme of reincarnation.

"PE" opens in a Buddhist temple where Terence is answering the five precepts of the initiation ceremony. He has said "aye" to four but balks at the fifth: "Do not have improper sexual relations" (130). The tale unfolds, while Terence stalls for time, as a flashback of his life in Asia and the U.S. When Terence finally says "aye" to the last precept toward the end of the story, he senses P.'s presence nearby, "not the one whom my eyes had sought and loved, or the one who had already lived and died," but "the one still waiting to be born" (144). By answering the last precept affirmatively, has Terence decided to forswear same-sex love, judged improper according to conventional Buddhist practice, or has he come to consider homosexuality as "proper," as the palpable presence of P. suggests? The relationship between Terence and P. surely rises above the lascivious liaisons of the clientele at the call line. An empathetic literary sensibility connects the two dear friends even beyond the grave. In memorializing the AIDS victim, Leong makes room in "Phoenix Eyes" for alternative masculinity in art and spirituality, in sickness and in death (see also Cheung, "Art").

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"I'd Love You to Want Me"

What Leong says of P.'s family in "Phoenix Eyes" is also true of men who still adhere to the conventional code of masculinity: they are not willing to admit that "the myth of…invulnerability is simply a myth" (Leong 143). What makes the protagonists in "OMH," "PE," and especially Viet Thanh Nguyen's "I'd Love You to Want Me" ("ILY") endearing is paradoxically their sense of vulnerability, which accrues to their empathy and solicitude. Nguyen's tale is narrated primarily from the point of view of Mrs. Khanh, a librarian whose spouse, a retired professor, has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease; the illness apparently takes a turn for the worse as the story unfolds. Mrs. Khanh, who spares no effort in giving the professor scrupulous care, is understandably peeved when he starts calling her by the name "Yen," which she suspects to belong to a secret flame. "Yen" turns out to be a clue not to the husband's amnesia but to that of the wife, who most likely suffers from concomitant memory loss stemming from "dissociative amnesia" ("What Are Dissociative"). While she plays the role of the sole caregiver throughout the story, the professor, unbeknownst to his steadfast spouse, has also been monitoring her mental health assiduously. The "feminine" ethic of care (as embodied by Mrs. Khanh) is practiced, albeit *sub rosa*, by the professor, a much more sympathetic figure than the cad in his wife's compromised imagination. Mrs. Khanh is verily the love of the professor's life unto oblivion. Both Yen and this reader are swept off their feet by the Professor toward the end of the story.[2]

Two forms of masculinity—"Vietnamese-masculine" and "American-masculine" (to echo Maxine Hong Kingston's coinage of "Chinese-feminine" and "American-feminine" in *The Woman Warrior*)—are embodied respectively by the professor and Vinh, their American son. Vinh's formidable physique looms over his mother, who notes that the edge of her hand could have "fitted into the deep cleft her son's chest," and her thighs aren't "quite as thick as his biceps" (104). But far from being impressed, she is reproachful: "If only he visited his parents as much as he did the gym" (104). Just as the armless artist in Leong's "PE" strikes the narrator as more stalwart than the soccer players with their "strong thighs and tanned calves," so the professor's *wen* 文 comportment surpasses Vinh's husky constitution in Mrs. Khanh's estimation. Although Vinh is a caregiver by profession he, along with his five siblings, hardly visits their aging parents, leaving their mother to look after their father and leaving the couple to fend for themselves. Even his phone calls to his parents come across as perfunctory. He calls his mother on his cell phone only as he is doing "something else"—cooking, watching TV, or driving—reflecting his nonchalance (115). Speaking on his siblings' behalf, Vinh tells Mrs. Khanh: "We think you should retire from the library…We can send home enough money every month to cover all the bills. You can have a housekeeper…a gardener too" (105). His remarks irk Mrs. Khanh, who states curtly, "I like to garden" (105). But Vinh dismisses her predilection and continues to dwell on budget consideration: "Mexican gardeners come cheap…You have got to be ready for the worst" (105–106). Upon this remark, the professor pipes up: "We've seen much worse than you…We're ready for anything" (106).

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The hardships the couple has countenanced in shepherding the family across the ocean and in raising six children in an inhospitable world steel them in ways unimaginable to and unattainable by their American offspring. Refugees like this couple, in Nguyen's words, are "nothing less than heroic" ("The Hidden"). The seemingly incidental scene sets up stark intergenerational contrast. Vinh, so heedless of his parents' artistic predisposition and longing for greater filial presence, is a mere shadow of his attentive and caring parents. Vinh does bring his parents a present from his trip to Vietnam, a replica of Picasso's "Dora Maar Seated" (name unspecified in the original), a piece that assumes surreal significance later. But the gift sits ill with his mother, so much so that she is always tempted to turn the picture on its back. Mrs. Khanh is discomfited by the oddness of the female subject "whose left eye was green and whose right eye was red" (105). The professor goes off on a tangent about the street on which Vinh has purchased the reproduction, but offers no comment on the piece itself.

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Unlike Vinh, who communicates with his parents half-heartedly, the couple hangs on each other's words. The professor could recall many of Mrs. Khanh's observations, reminiscences that call forth his own poetic reveries, as when he describes their visit to their old house in Saigon: "The solitary alley lamp illuminated tears of rust streaking the walls, washed down from the iron grill…by the monsoon rain. As the taxi's wipers squeaked against the windshield, a late-night masseur biked past, announcing his calling with the shake of a glass bottle filled with pebbles" (118). Most telling is the professor's verbatim repetition of Mrs. Khanh's response: "You told me it was the loneliest sound in the world" (118). Another fond memory is embedded in the title. "Remember this song?" the professor asks Mrs. Khanh when the band starts playing Lobo's "I'd Love You to Want Me" at the wedding banquet that opens the story. "We listened to it all the time. Before the children were born" (101). Although Mrs. Khanh knows that the song was not released till after her first pregnancy, she responds affirmatively and refrains from correcting the professor lest he should become unduly perturbed by his "senior moment." Their brief exchange indicates the professor's lingering amorous feeling for Mrs. Khanh and her protectiveness of him. But he then says something that rattles his wife no end: "Let's dance…You always insisted we dance when you heard this song, Yen" (101). To Mrs. Khanh, who is dismayed by the professor addressing her by an unfamiliar name, his gallant overture comes across as a symptom of his lapses of memory, and of faith.

His faux pas in the context of an invitation to dance perhaps makes it all the more painful for Mrs. Khanh, a woman smitten by the professor's *wen* 文 charisma from their first meeting at her home in Vietnam when he was *wenren* 文人 par excellence as professor of Oceanography. After their settlement in the U.S. as refugees, however, he could only find a job (his occupation for twenty years) teaching Vietnamese to mostly heritage students. "That was true love" to her nevertheless, his "going to work every day and never once complaining" about the humdrum livelihood (113). But when Mrs. Khanh wonders if Yen might be one of his students, she feels "a jab of pain that she mistook at first for heartburn" before recognizing it as "jealousy" (102–103). Her twinge suggests how deeply she still yearns for her spouse's continuing affection, a sentiment encapsulated by the opening lines of Lobo's lyrics: "I'd Love You to Want Me/The way that I want you."

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Several other romantic flashbacks underscore the professor's *wen* appeal—especially his informed yet starry-eyed appreciation of nature, and his poetic faith. During their honeymoon by the beach in Vung Tau/Cap Saint Jacques, the professor exclaimed, under a full moon: "'Imagine!' he said, voice filled with wonder as he began speaking about how the volume of the Pacific equaled the moon's… and went on to talk about the strange fish of the deep sea canyons and then the inexplicability of rogue waves" (101). Even after she has lost track of his illuminating rumination, "it hardly mattered, for by then the sound of his voice had seduced her, as reassuring in its measured tones" as when she heard it for the first time when he was explaining to her father "his dissertation on the Kuroshio current's thermodynamics" (101). During their frightful sea voyage as fugitives, with faint hopes for survival, the professor "stood at the ship's bow as if he were at his lectern, the children huddled together at his knees for protection, and told them lies"—white lies reassuring them that "the current…is going straight to the Philippines" (114). When land was sighted unexpectedly, Mrs. Khanh was "so seized by the ecstasy…that she had blurted out 'I love you,'" something "she had never said in public and hardly ever in private" (114).

Even decades later, the *wen* 文 qi, which seems to have seeped into the professor's very being, persists. To Mrs. Khanh, her aged spouse is "redolent of well-worn paperbacks," a "comforting mustiness" that she associates with "secondhand bookstores"; his fair skin "thin as paper and lined with blue veins" (99). Not surprisingly, books, along with the professor's blue notebooks and calligraphy—the *wenren*'s accouterments—furnish the key to the mystery of the troubling moniker. Mrs. Khanh, nettled by the professor's repetition of "Yen," would register his blunders by "ghost-writing" in his notebook at night at his desk, "flanked on either side by bookshelves that held several hundred volumes in Vietnamese, French, and English" (a hint that the professor is trilingual 112).

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His ambition is to "own more books than he could ever possibly read, a desire fueled by having left behind all his books when they had fled Vietnam" (112). Whereas the professor wishes to hold on to his past life as *wenren* 文人 through an accumulation of books and memories, Mrs. Khanh resorts to the opposite coping mechanism of forgetting, whether consciously or subconsciously, to manage her grief and loss. Nguyen prepares the reader for the breathtaking denouement by scattering seemingly haphazard remarks about the gifts of books from the professor to his wife, about his habit of jotting down his errors in his blue notebooks, about his lifelong calligraphy practice and his distinctive penmanship. The denouement turns on a book of short stories gifted by the professor and the autograph therein.

Much in the way Desdemona loves Othello for his tales of exploits and he loves her for being a doting listener, the professor used to be the reader and his wife the avid listener. Their roles have been reversed by his illness, with Mrs. Khanh reading to her spouse. The inner turmoil stirred up in her by the name of Yen is not unrelated to their *wen* 文 rapport, for the men and women of letters that populate Chinese drama and popular fiction (particularly the novels by Quynh Dao 琼瑶, Mrs. Khanh's favorite author) are hopelessly romantic. So considerate is Mrs. Khanh, who has witnessed the professor's meltdown upon being diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, that she chooses to hold her tongue instead of confronting her husband about the suspect name, to shield him from realizing the gravity of his mental disorder. More than once she had avoided correcting the professor for a similar reason, as when she decides not to challenge his anachronistic memory regarding Lobo's song. Her reflective considerateness has traditionally been taken for granted in women, who have always been expected to be sensitive caregivers, whether as mothers, wives, or daughters. In traditional Chinese culture, such thoughtfulness is also associated with *wenren* 文人 not unlike the professor, whose sensitivity inheres in their artistic, literary, or romantic disposition.

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The professor is clearly partial to songs, dances, paintings, and especially books. It also takes a woman of like mind—Mrs. Khanh, a lover of arts and culture who enjoys her job as a librarian—to appreciate his temperament. When Vinh tries to persuade her to quit by telling her she need not worry about their livelihood, she replies, "It's not about the money" (106). In addition to upholding *wen* 文 values, the couple's occupations connect them to their homeland. The professor teaches Vietnamese. Mrs. Khanh works part-time in the Garden Grove library, in charge of "the sizable collection of Vietnamese books and movies purchased for the residents of nearby Little Saigon, who, if they came to the library with a question, were directed to her perch behind the circulation desk" (108). Their *wen* expertise is inextricable from their ancestral heritage and their distinctive contribution to their adoptive country. Mrs. Khanh's job as librarian gives her a sense of self-worth. Even after respective retirements the couple continues to support each other by their *wen* facilities: posting signs, writing things down, and reading. Mrs. Khanh composes "a series of lists which, posted strategically around the house," reminds the professor of his daily routine. (108). These signs and his own assiduous notetaking apparently have enabled him to take care of himself most of the time.

But the "mistaken" identity that opens the story continues to nettle Mrs. Khanh, especially when the professor starts "coming home as a stranger," bringing roses that Mrs. Khanh presumes to be intended for Yen (109). Given their four decades of marriage and his remarkable long-term memory, however, it seems rather inconceivable that he would have confused his wife with someone else. Evidence of his ability to retain verbal information (specifically names) and sensory impressions abounds. When Vinh tells him that the Picasso knockoff is purchased in Dong Khoi, the professor trots out the street's prior appellations: "There was a time when that street was called Tu Do…And before that, Rue Catinat" (104). The couple mourned the lost name of their beloved city when they visited "their old house on Phan Than Gian…renamed Dien Bien Phu"; Saigon too has been renamed but they could not bear "to call it Ho Chi Minh City" (117). Can someone who retrieves the lost names of places so accurately and readily be forgetful of his wife's name, calling a steadfast companion who has figured in just about every one of his reveries by another's name?

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By contrast, Mrs. Khanh does not like to think about their home in Saigon, and does not remember her comment regarding "the loneliest sound." Instead of arguing with the professor, however, she humors him (as is her wont) by playing along, asking him whether the sound refers to the wipers or the glass bottle. "The bottle," he replies, and she confirms his answer by lying: "It seemed so at the time…I hadn't heard that sound in years" (118). By covering up her own blank spaces repeatedly, Mrs. Khanh may have also prevented her spouse from detecting the severity of *her* mental decline, loss of memory incurred from their tribulations as refugees.

According to the American Psychiatric Association, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) associated with memory may take two opposite forms: "First, victims of trauma have intrusive recollections of the traumatic event in which they vividly and repeatedly re-experience disturbing sensory impressions and emotions associated with the event. Second, at the same time they have difficulties remembering important parts of the event—a feature known as dissociative amnesia" ("What Are Dissociative"). Mrs. Khanh arguably exhibits both forms of disturbances, triggered by what she cannot help remembering and what she must forget respectively. The voyage across the Pacific was so terrifying that afterward she develops an intense phobia of the ocean (ironic given the professor's specialty), and she keeps "re-experiencing disturbing sensory impressions and emotions" associated with water. Prior to the professor's Alzheimer diagnosis, the couple had intended to travel extensively upon retirement, but Mrs. Khanh had ruled out ocean cruise, for "open expanses of water prompted fears of drowning, a phobia so strong that she no longer took baths, and even when showering kept her back to the spray" (110). Her paranoia dovetails with the first form of PTSD disturbance.

Mrs. Khanh is no less susceptible to "dissociative amnesia." Nguyen opens *The Refugees* with an epigraph from James Fenton's "A German Requiem": "It is not your memories which haunt you/It is not what you have written down./It is what you have forgotten, what you must forget./What you must go on forgetting all your life." Although Mrs. Khanh is unable to forget the harrowing sea voyage on account of her obsessive memory, the professor, most likely out of considerateness for her PTSD condition, has always refrained from speaking about their time at sea even as he refers to "so many other things they had done in the past together, including events of which she had no recollection" (115). Her mental evacuation of these events suggests that what she has forgotten is what she *must* forget and go on forgetting. Whereas the first form of disturbance manifests in Mrs. Khanh as phobia, the second takes the form of amnesia. Consciously or not, Mrs. Khanh screens out many of the idyllic moments with the professor in their former homeland, lest they remind her of unbearable losses. Along with their lost home in Saigon, which she admittedly doesn't like to think about, she has also erased mental footage from their romantic past.

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Mrs. Khanh herself is not entirely unmindful of the black holes in her psyche. The more she listens to the professor's punctilious accounts of their storied past, the more she fears "her own memory faltering" and the more she lends credence to his long-term memory: "Perhaps they really had eaten ice cream flavored with durian on the veranda of a tea plantation in the central highlands, reclining on rattan chairs" (115). And, later, "And was it possible they'd fed bamboo shoots to the tame deer in the Saigon zoo? Or together had beaten off a pickpocket, a scabby refugee from the bombed-out countryside who'd sneaked up on them in the Ben Thanh market?" (115). Such precise details are unlikely to be concocted by a ravaged mind; rather, vignettes associated with their halcyon days might have been blotted out from Mrs. Khanh's memory.

This tale gathers momentum once the screw of Mrs. Khanh's point of view starts to turn. Significantly, it is through writing (and ghostwriting) that the couple's concurrent atrophy in memory and mutual solicitude are writ large. The professor has been coping with his illness by keeping a small blue notebook in which he records his daily errors and, as we soon find out, his wife's lapses as well. When Mrs. Khanh can no longer bear to be called Yen, she too resorts to writing—ghostwriting and imitative handwriting—surreptitiously recording "every incident of mistaken identity in his notebooks" in the hope of straightening him out, but to no avail: "the next

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morning he would read her forgeries without reaction, and not long afterward would call her Yen once more, until she thought she might burst into tears if she heard that name again" (113). Eventually, she confronts the professor openly and sharply:

> "That's not my name. I am not that woman, whoever she is, if she even exists."
> "Oh?…Your name isn't Yen?…Then what is it?"
> She wasn't prepared for the question, having been worried only about her husband calling her by the wrong name…
> "My name is Sa…I am your wife."
> "Right." (119)

Mrs. Khanh's inability to provide a ready answer for her name flags her mental state, shifting our clinical gaze from husband to wife. While seconding her belated answer ("Sa"), the professor writes in his blue notebook afterward: "*Matters worsening. Today she insisted I call her by another name. Must keep closer eye on her…for she may not know who she is anymore*" (119–120). This italic entry reveals that the professor has been monitoring his spouse as much as she has been caring for him. Mrs. Khanh, who thinks that she can fool the professor into thinking that the note about the erroneous name is written by himself, is outwitted. Just as she shields him from his mistakes, however, he shields her from hers by conniving. The two avoid agitating each other through writing.

Nguyen orchestrates this *wen* couple's *pas de deux*, heightening suspense and culminating in a tour de force finale, through unreliable perspectives, ambiguation, as well as the encryption and inscription of books. Several phrases invite contrapuntal interpretations. When Mrs. Khanh finally resigns from the library because there is "no choice," the reader is left to decide whether the resignation is necessitated by the professor's worsening condition or her own—her inability to carry on with her job (120). When she drives home with the box of travel guides (a surprise farewell gift from her coworkers), "she fought to control the sense that ever so slowly the book of her life was being closed" (120). One wonders whether the closed book references the end of her *wen* 文career as a librarian or the loss of her beloved *wen* spouse, who has morphed into a virtual stranger. Still, her affection for the professor endures. When she cannot find him upon arriving home with her box of books, she hunts for him frantically all over town, riddled by guilt and shame about her jealousy, only to be rekindled when she finally finds the professor in his library, unpacking her box of travel guides, touching "the cover of each book with great care, tenderly" (123). Far from appreciating this tender gesture, "she knew, not for the first time, that it wasn't she who was the love of his life" (123). Does she imply that he loves books more than his wife? Or that he is fondling Yen's books? In any case, she is so relieved to find her lost spouse that when asked to identify herself in the half-light, she answers: "It's Yen" (123). When the professor sits down "heavily in his armchair," perhaps in tremendous relief at retrieving this "lost" Yen, she notices that his oxfords are "encrusted in mud," a hint that he might not have left the house at all, that he was probably tending her beloved garden in her absence (123). They have found each other anew.

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The book Mrs. Khanh then selects to read to the professor may be construed literally as a roman à clef. "Having ruled out the travel guides," she picks up the book of shorts: "A short story, she thought, would be just long enough" (124). The finale juggles this collection with two other *wen* appurtenances: the Picasso's painting gifted by Vinh and calligraphy in the form of the professor's autograph:

> Sitting beside him on the carpet, she found herself next to the painting. She turned her back to the woman with the two eyes on one side of her face…When she opened the book, she could feel the woman looking over her shoulder at her name, written in his precise hand under that of the author. She wondered what, if anything, she knew about

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> love. Not much, perhaps, but enough to know that what she would do for him now she would do again tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that. She would read out loud, from the beginning. She would read with measured breath, to the very end. She would read as if every letter counted, page by page and word by word. (124)

What accounts for this change of heart from almost wishing the professor dead at one point out of jealousy to vowing everlasting attendance, from simmering with frustration to waxing poetic? Mrs. Khanh, we have been told, never reads past "the title pages of his gifts [of books], satisfied at seeing her name penned in his elegant hand beneath those of the authors" (109). The word the green/red-eyed Dora Maar is fixing on is indubitably "Yen"—the name forgotten by the green-eyed wife, lost to her along with many snippets of the prelapsarian past shared by the couple in their homeland. The recovery of her name makes Mrs. Khanh realize that her judgment of the professor is as partial as that of the woman in the painting, whose "eyes looked forth from one side of her face" (107). Hence she chides herself for her false surmise, her inadequate appreciation of his abiding love.

This ending, like that of Louie's "OMH" and Leong's "PE," is couched in literary tropes. Not only are words, letters, books, reading, beginning and ending (of a story) recapitulated in the last two sentences, Mrs. Khanh's reading aloud to the professor mirrors his reading aloud to her in his luminous days, her "measured breath" echoing his "measured tones" she overheard before their marriage. Yen might have forgotten her own name, but not the distinctive autograph of her beloved, nor his enchanting voice, whose cadence she replicates in kind.

Their mutual sustenance through attentive silence anticipates the famous LEAP strategy—Listen, Empathize, Agree, Partner—proposed by Dr. Xavior Amador to help mentally ill patients with anosognosia. By *listening* reflectively, *empathizing* with the spouse's mental deterioration, *agreeing* to the extent of colluding with the beloved's faulty memory, respecting and allying with each other as *partners*, the professor and Mrs. Khanh seem ahead of the psychiatric profession in nursing someone with "a broken brain" (Amador 38). The beauty and efficacy of their partnership are conveyed by Nguyen's empathetic art.

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Conclusion

The affinity of *ren* 仁 benevolence, *wen* 文 literature and fine arts, *renwen* 人文 the humanities, and *renwen* 仁文 signifying the empathy endemic to and inculcated by literature merits recapitulation. All great arts, from Homer to Bob Dylan or Kendrick Lamar, from Maxine Hong Kingston to Viet Thanh Nguyen or Yo-Yo Ma, elicit empathy, and therefore the artists and their audience (subsumed in China traditionally as *wenren* 文人 persons of culture) exemplify *ren* 仁 or kindness to some degree. My coinage of 仁文 *renwen*, rendered as "empathetic art," underscores the relationship between masterpieces and fellow feeling and the quintessential function of literature—not art for art's sake nor for ideological ends but for the cultivation of empathy. I contend that ethic writers whose literary works have fallen by the wayside previously are all the more capable of compassion toward other displaced souls, that their marginality as *wenren* 文人 (writers and artists) in the dominant culture actually redounds to their *renwen* 仁文—empathetic literary sensibility—a common signature of the three writers analyzed.

The three stories have been selected not just for their content but also for the art of telling—befitting a meta-analysis of *renwen* 仁文 appeal. Like their creations, Louie, Leong, and Nguyen are *renwen* exemplars, and their tales can be savored anew as metafiction. In addition to using elliptical names to reflect precarious Asian American identities, the three writers cunningly deploy narrative frames to effect giddy cliffhangers. By the end of Louie's "OMH," Stephen, the assumed narrator, turns into a doubly fictitious character, thereby clouding all the other characters' identities as figments of the narrator cum author's agitated imagination. In Leong's "PE," P., whose

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patriarchal family neither acknowledges the gay offspring nor wishes to hear his name, remains a lone initial unto death until Terence, the speaker, spells out his name in full—Peter Hsieh—and resuscitates him at the very moment he assents to the precept against improper sex. Terence's "Aye" can thus be interpreted fluidly (perhaps depending on the reader's persuasion) as a renunciation or an affirmation of homoerotic love. In Nguyen's "ILY" the name Yen is emblematic of all that Mrs. Khanh must forget and that the professor cannot forget. Against the ravages of Alzheimer's and PTSD, the espial of the lost name (which Mrs. Khanh still refuses to pronounce) augurs golden conjugal bliss. For the readers who fail to catch the addressee in the autograph, the author has encoded instruction on how to close-read this twilight romance: "read as if every letter counted, page by page and word by word."

Louie, Leong, and Nguyen show that the ethic of care evoked through their writing very much becomes a (hu)man. For Asian Americans historically threatened with extermination, and at the time of this essay's writing by anti-Asian violence around the Covid-19 plague, *renwen* 仁文 is imperative for survival. *Wen* 文 ensures *we will live*; *ren* 仁 ensures that our lives are worth living.[3]

Notes

1 Calling so much attention to myself at the outset is admittedly very un-Asian, against both the Chinese prescription of feminine modesty and the American endorsement of the model minority. Yet it is precisely through our own voices that we must ensure our survival in the New World. I thank Russell Leong, Hannah Nahm, and Viet Thanh Nguyen for their suggestions and comments.

2 I say "this reader" for the ending of "ILY" demands punctilious close reading. Although I have taught this story repeatedly to UCLA English majors, they are slow to catch Mrs. Khanh's name in the last paragraph of the story.

3 "*We will live!*" are the last three words in Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (382, italics in the original); the prototype for P. lives again in Leong's "PE"; DWL says of *Pangs of Love and Other Writings* that it "feels like a second life" (277).

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